

# Chapter 9

## Transition to School: A Rite of Passage in Life

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### 9.1 Introduction

Sweden has a comprehensive school system with 9 years of compulsory school (for children aged 7–16 years), called “grundskola”. This compares with primary and lower secondary school in other countries. Often, the first 5 or 6 years of schooling are in a smaller school with class teachers, while the remaining 3 or 4 years are in a larger school with subject teachers. In Sweden the day-care institutions/kindergarten for children aged 1–5 years are called “preschools”, with their own national curriculum. Another early childhood institution is the preschool class (children aged 6 years). Although the preschool class is not compulsory, it is attended by almost everyone in the age group. Most preschool classes are located with the lower level of the compulsory school and are regulated by the same curriculum as the compulsory school but with no specified goals for the children to attain.

In Sweden today, there is a concern that children are not achieving as well as they used to, as evidenced by the comparative assessment analysis of country-based data, PISA and TIMSS. In Sweden, questions have been asked about whether the limited results might be due to the fact that Swedish children begin school at 7, while most countries start school at 6. Such questions also raise challenges for the field of transitions in early childhood education.

Transitions in educational systems are organised in different ways around the world, but in each case, children pass through a number of marked transitions, organised on the basis of age group, stages or types of schools (European Commission 2009; Marlow-Ferguson 2001).

This chapter reports research conducted within the research group TIES, Transitions In Educational Settings. The group has its base at Mälardalen University in Västerås, Sweden ([www.mdh.se](http://www.mdh.se)). The TIES researchers all have experience as

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preschool teachers, schoolteachers and/or special needs educators. During the last two decades, with an interpretive research approach, the group has developed its understanding of issues linked to educational transitions encountered by children and young people. All studies have a focus on what education means from a child and/or teacher perspective. Recently, the focus has been on transitions within preschool (children aged 1–5 years) and between preschool, preschool class and school. TIES aims to explore the nature, impact, diversity, governmental and generational investment in early childhood transitions, with a view to enhancing the daily and cumulative experience of education and its lifelong impact.

TIES has studied transitions in the educational system of Sweden, focusing especially on a perspective of what they mean for children and young people (Garpelin 1997, 2003, 2004b; Garpelin et al. 2008; Garpelin and Sandberg 2010; Hellberg 2007; Sandberg 2012). The group has made connections between educational transitions and the concept of rites of passage (van Gennep 1960). In this chapter, theoretical foundations for these studies are considered along with how these have influenced our research. Finally, some implications and dilemmas arising from the research are discussed.

## 9.2 Theoretical Perspectives

### 9.2.1 *Rites of Passage*

The anthropologist van Gennep (1960) introduced the concept “les rites de passage” for ceremonies, which have the form of rituals and occur with regularity.

The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another ... there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined ... we encounter a wide degree of general similarity among ceremonies of birth, childhood, social puberty, betrothal, marriage, pregnancy, fatherhood, initiation into religious societies, and funerals. In this respect, man's life resembles nature, from which neither the individual nor the society stands independent ... a periodicity which has repercussions on human life, with stages and transitions, movements forward, and periods of relative inactivity. (van Gennep 1960, pp. 2–3)

Other anthropologists have also reported on rites of passage (Bateson 1958; Mead 1939), and the concept has been used in other contexts, often with reference to psychoanalytic theory (Bettelheim 1954; Erikson 1982; Freud 1953; Grimes 2000; Holm and Bowker 1994; Kreinath et al. 2004), as well as in educational research (Fabian 2007; Lam and Pollard 2006).

For van Gennep (1960), culturally bounded ceremonies were linked to different life crises in relation to transitions between different stages in the life of individuals. He identified how the act of passing through a door into a house or from one room to another had a certain meaning in many cultures. The act was given a symbolic significance with respect to transitions from one stage to another.

Van Gennep introduced the metaphor of crossing the threshold of a door: the moment when you are neither in the room you are leaving nor in the new room to help explain such transitions. He applied the Latin word for threshold: “limen” to form the concepts he used to describe the rites of passage process. He divided the process into three phases: “preliminal” for the separation phase, “liminal” for the transition phase and “postliminal” for the incorporation phase.

In the transition process, the individual is in a well-known room (status/position/stage) and then is guided by significant others (those in power) onto the threshold (into the passage), where the individual, for a short moment, neither exists in the well-known room the individual has just left (the former status/position/stage) nor has entered the new room where the individual has never been before (the new status/position/stage). Rather, the individual is being, without belonging, to any room (being without any status/position/stage). Finally, the individual passes into the new room (status/position/stage). Van Gennep saw how the transition, wherein the individual passes from one status to another, was made more obvious, in most countries, by culturally bound ceremonies: rites of passage.

Turner (1969) specifically focused on human relations during the middle phase of rites of passage: the liminal phase. Turner characterised being a part of a movement or a collective, with shared experiences, as experiencing a sense of “communitas”. Later, Turner (1982) introduced the concept of “liminoid” for the situation when someone is going through a liminal phase with others, sharing the same experiences and feelings as they are. This moment of shared experience might be characterised as a moment when circumstances previously regarded to be of great importance are set aside. This experience might have such an impact that the surrounding world does not appear to be itself anymore. Old truths and beliefs might be abandoned.

### ***9.2.2 An Interpretive Approach and a Relational Perspective***

To deepen the understanding of transitions from the perspective of those involved, we have applied an interpretive approach in our research (Denzin 1997; Garpelin 1997; Mehan 1992) with its roots in hermeneutics and phenomenology (Dilthey 1976; Giorgi 1985; Ödman 2007; Ricoeur 1981; Turner and Bruner 1986). The main focus is on getting a deeper understanding of the meaning those involved give the phenomena studied. It is about understanding the experiences of individuals by interpreting the expressions they make, explicitly or implicitly, since it is impossible to capture the actual experience of an individual (Dilthey 1976).

A relational interpretation perspective formulated by Garpelin (1997, 2004a, 2011) emanates from the work of Asplund (1987), Erikson (1959), Goffman (1959, 1961, 1963, 1967), Laing (1969), Mead (1934) and Schutz (1967). This perspective can be summed up as follows:

Even if we experience the world around us individually, human beings still take an existing shared reality for granted. The reality exists prior to the individual, but

each and every one of us is bound to interpret and give a meaning to it. Forming a meaning can be regarded as an ongoing process where we influence and are influenced by each other. Communicating with others means taking each other's roles in interplay where we gradually learn more and more about ourselves. Taking the role of the other gives us an opportunity to look at ourselves from the other person's perspective. Following the process of role-taking, mind and self are social products formed in interaction with others, where mutually shared significant symbols indicate an important condition for the interpretation of each other's actions. As individuals we act out of two perspectives of ourselves, a social one, starting from position, role and group membership and a personal one, taking the point from our view of ourselves, independent of how the environment differs. We try to protect our own integrity by affecting the inner life of people around us. We act in social situations, determined to force our personal projects, something that is due to individual background, common sense knowledge, present actions and other things in the context. We act intentionally, considering the past, the present and the future. The way we have managed challenges/crises earlier in our life will affect the way of dealing with similar ones later on. Common experiences not only facilitate the conditions for interpreting the role-taking of the other. Such knowledge can also affect one's way of taking others' roles, not unreservedly but with preconception. A group is characterised by mutual opinions of all members, opinions of the relations that exist within the group. Every group has its own common events to refer to at regular intervals. When a group interacts with other groups, acting as a team, presenting how they define a situation, everyone, including the audience, is aware of the potential existence of a "front region" everyone can be a part of and a "back region" open for team members only (Garpelin 1997, 2004a, 2011).

Van Gennep (1960) identified a gap between socially and individually defined identity. Indeed, he saw "status" as a position coming from society and "identity" as an internal process of becoming. Society has a crucial role in leading the individual through transition. In this way, the individual might be helped to understand him/herself better. This can be compared with Mead's (1934) theory on self and the role of the generalised other. If society offers nothing but undefined transitions for children and young people, this might have an influence on their capability to understand and master the crises of their lives (Erikson 1959, 1982), and this might cause difficulties in the development of a sense of coherence in life (Antonovsky 1987).

## **9.3 Rites of Passage and Transitions in Preschool and School**

### ***9.3.1 School Transitions as Rites of Passage***

In Swedish society, traditional rites of passage, such as baptism (christening) and confirmation have lost their significance. In a longitudinal study over 10 years, Garpelin (1997, 2003) has shown how young people in Sweden experience the transition to the senior level of compulsory schooling (at the age of 12/13) as a critical

incident, from both a pupil as well as a life perspective. This was a transition from the world of children to the world of adolescents, organised and sanctioned by the world of grownups: the society. The concepts of van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1982) were applied to understand the transition in three phases: *Separation* from the previous world, in our case, leaving the world of school children; *Transition*, on the threshold, before entering the new world, the summer between the two school worlds; and *Incorporation* into the new world, entering the world of school adolescents.

After the split from the world of schoolchildren, the young people in this study spent a whole summer preparing for their future life among school adolescents. Being in a liminoid position had a significant impact on their life situation. During this time they were occupied by thoughts about the new world. Others too were in the same position. Knowing that they were not alone, they were all aware of the fact that they would be the newcomers at the new school. With significant others, they went through what they could experience entering the new school, expecting to share a collective vulnerability such as meeting older pupils in the rest rooms. They had heard many frightening stories about how newcomers were bullied by those in upper classes. Also in the new school class, there would be much at stake, with fears to experience individual vulnerability. Would they be accepted or rejected in the new school class? Could they trust their best friend when they together met the new acquaintances? Would their best friend desert them for some new more interesting classmate? The question of choosing a desk mate might turn into a problem for one's self-confidence. Other big issues included who to go with, how to act and what to wear on the first school day in August. Some also felt a fear that they would not master the new subjects, stand the pressure from the new teachers or make the change of books in the locker during break in time for the next class. During this time, they were in the position of being on the threshold between the two worlds, that of children and that of adolescents.

Entering the new school and meeting the older school students resulted in the feeling of shared collective vulnerability. Soon this phase was over. But, for some, the incorporation phase meant experiencing individual vulnerability, victimisation and bullying which could last for years (Garpelin 2003, 2004a).

### 9.3.2 *Transitions Within Preschool*

The data collected in the transition to secondary school study (Garpelin 1997, 2003) indicated that transitions between other educational levels, including between preschool and compulsory school, might also be interpreted as rites of passage.

In a research overview about transitions in early childhood (Ekström et al. 2008), the TIES research group learned how studies of transitions from home to preschool, but above all, transitions from preschool to school, dominated. Studies of transitions within preschool institutions, such as between units with different age-groupings, were rare. These findings are reinforced in other literature (Dunlop and Fabian 2006; Stephen 2006; Vogler et al. 2008).

A new study (Garpelin and Kallberg 2008; Garpelin et al. 2010) was conducted at two preschools (Ship and Butterfly) to obtain a deeper understanding of the meanings transitions within preschool might have for children, their parents and preschool teachers.

The children at the Ship preschool experienced three transitions between age groups, while those at Butterfly had only one transition between age groups. Two different approaches were identified.

In the Ship, the transitions were regarded as natural rites through which everyone in the age group passed at the same time. A point of departure was the fact that the children differed with regard to their development and experience – and the emphasis was on how the pedagogical environment was prepared to offer opportunities to challenge, stimulate and recognise all children. The receiving unit in the preschool was emptied of children who in turn went on to the next unit.

The teachers made the transition together with the children, taking with them their common culture, including norms and socio-emotional atmosphere. The children brought their personal belongings with them. They moved on a special day – having “a moving-in party”, emphasising the fact that the children were taking over the new unit. The children’s group was regarded as a resource in the transition and the encounter with the new environment.

The idea was that the transition brings the individual to a new pedagogical environment so that they can be challenged and inspired and to which they can respond. All pedagogical work was permeated by the individuals striving to feel secure and relying on their self-esteem. The aim was that they would be curious about the new environment. The transitions were meant to be clear, natural and obvious to all involved.

In the Butterfly preschool, there was a stress on the importance that external factors such as economy and politics have on transitions. Maturity played a central role in forming an opinion of whether the child was “mature” enough to adjust himself/herself to the new pedagogical environment and the conditions that prevailed in the new unit.

The idea was that the individual should manage the transition to the new situation. For the children involved, the transition to the unit for older children was mostly about adjusting to a new environment, new older children and new teachers within existing culture, attitudes, rules and norms. It was also a question of being able to feel confident in the new unit.

The teachers viewed the transition as “a necessary evil” with which they had to deal. Consequently, they strived to make transitions at a time when the individual child was mature enough. The pedagogical idea was that transitions should be as smooth, unnoticed and adjusted as possible – as if the child was “floating over” to the new unit.

The analysis revealed two approaches, one in favour of transitions as rites of passage and the other trying to make them as unnoticed as possible. In the latter case, there is less stress on the social definition of identity (van Gennep 1960). The two approaches also offer different conditions with reference to individual and collective vulnerability (Garpelin 2003, 2004a). In the Ship preschool, the transition is

mostly connected to a collective experience, which might assist in the prevention of victimisation and bullying (Corsaro et al. 2003).

## **9.4 Spending One Year on a Bridge Between Preschool and School**

This chapter began by asking why Swedish children are not achieving as well as they used to, as evidenced by PISA and TIMSS. Perhaps the limited results are because Swedish children begin school at 7, while most countries have a school start at 6. There are many other possible reasons for this phenomenon. In this chapter, the emphasis is on what happens in Swedish children's transitions between the preschool, the preschool class and the school.

### ***9.4.1 The Lesson of Failure in Primary School***

In a recent evaluation study undertaken by TIES (Garpelin et al. 2009), the crucial question was why some children, despite the massive resources invested, did not obtain the goals of the national curriculum in grade 3. Class teachers and special needs educators were interviewed. In addition, a parallel case study was made on the transition between the preschool class and the first year in school (Garpelin and Sandberg 2010; Sandberg 2012).

These studies raised some challenges. Firstly, does the preschool class have a role as a "bridge" between the worlds of the preschool and the school? The results of the studies indicated that the aim to make the transition as "smooth" as possible contributed to an uncertainty for everyone: children as well as teachers. Secondly, the Matthew effect (Stanovich 2000), through which children with advantage before the transition gained more than the less advantaged, was observed as the gap between able and slower learners increased over time. Thirdly, there was a lack of a holistic perspective, with the class teachers seeing any problems being due to the individual child and not to the learning environment.

### ***9.4.2 Transitions Between Preschool and School and the Role of the Preschool Class***

Several studies have documented how transition to school impacts on children's well-being and learning opportunities (Bulkeley and Fabian 2006; Dockett and Perry 2005). Fabian and Dunlop (2006) and Garpelin (2003) stress how transition to school can be one of the most important events in the life of a child, both from a perspective of here and now and from a longer-term perspective.

The preschool class was introduced in Sweden in 1998 to facilitate the transition between preschool and school (Skolverket 2008). Children in many other countries start school at 6 years of age and play, and creativity are common characteristics of the pedagogy in their first year (Broström and Wagner 2003; Dockett and Perry 2005; O’Kane and Hayes 2006).

Einarsdóttir (2006) studied how teachers in Iceland work in preschool, compared with first years of school. She found that in preschool the priority was on nurturing, play and freedom, while it was on subjects, lessons and guidance in school. When the Icelandic preschool class became a part of the compulsory school, the way of working in the preschool class tended to become similar to that of the school.

Children begin school at 6 years of age in Norway, but unlike Iceland, the first year of school is characterised by a mixture of both free play and formalised literacy work (Eriksen Hagtvet 2003), drawing on both preschool and school traditions.

Some Swedish studies (Peréz Prieto et al. 2003; Skolverket 2001) conclude that there are strong signs of school approaches being introduced into preschool classes. Our own study (Garpelin et al. 2009), on the other hand, indicated that the teachers working in the preschool classes often defended their way of working against what was regarded as a school tradition.

## **9.5 Borderlands, Bridges and Rites of Passage: Understanding Children’s Learning Journeys from Preschool into School**

The new TIES research project (Garpelin 2011), funded by the Swedish Research Council, is designed to deepen our understanding about the transitions and the educational practices that children meet during the years from preschool and the preschool class into the first year of school. Of particular importance is what these transitions mean for children with different abilities and experiences. The project offers opportunities to scrutinise the educational settings in the preschool, the preschool class and the school and the transitions between them, especially with reference to processes of inclusion and exclusion. As well, it allows study of the impact the transitions have upon children’s learning and participation over time.

An interpretive approach and a relational interpretation perspective will be applied in the study as we seek to ascertain the perspectives of teachers, parents and children. Data will be gathered in six ethnographic case studies through participant observation and interviews. Interviews and a survey will be conducted with teachers and parents will be interviewed. Finally, “learning journey interviews” will be conducted with children and their parents to understand the processes through which children pass during their early childhood educational transitions. The results will be analysed, together with those from former studies, all with the purpose of deepening our understanding of the meaning of these transitions in the life of children.

The results will also be compared with those from a similar project from New Zealand (Peters 2010). In particular, our project has adopted the concepts of bridges as supports for learning and “borderland” as a shared space of understanding. Further, we have adopted Peter’s formulation of how children’s learning processes during transitions from preschool to school can be understood in terms of “learning journeys” (Peters 2010).

## 9.6 Implications, Dilemmas and Crucial Questions

An important issue arising from our research is whether school start should be considered as a rite of passage for the collective or an invisible/smooth transition for the individual. We can identify some crucial dilemmas from our research so far:

- Should we try to protect the individual or rely on group processes as we organise transitions?
- Will the individual child cope with the demands and expectations of the transition, or should the learning environment be prepared to offer opportunities and challenge, stimulate and recognise all children, regardless of their different abilities and experiences?
- Should the pedagogical environment in preschool/preschool class be adjusted so that it resembles the first year of school or should the first year of school’s pedagogical environment be adjusted to resemble that of the preschool/preschool class?
- How should the pedagogical environments in preschools/preschool classes and schools be organised so that they have their focus on the well-being of the children’s here-and-now, but still offer them opportunities so that they will have the best chances to cope with the demands they will encounter as pupils in school.
- By encouraging those that are eager and potentially quick learners to develop their reading skills and, at the same time, assisting others to develop their talents on the football ground, teachers fulfil the Matthew effect (Stanovich 2000). How can we decrease the gap between able and less able learners over time, not holding back the quick learners?

“Curling parents” (Hougaard 2002) is a phenomenon discussed in the Nordic countries. These are parents who, like a curler, wipe out all roughness on the path on which their children are about to embark. If the marked transitions within and between preschool and school are reduced or even erased, it would be like creating a system of “curling schools”. The Swedish preschool class has such a role, that of a bridge to smooth the transition between preschool and school.

From a child’s perspective, the transition to school might be recognised as an institutionalised border between the life of a preschool child and that of a school-child. Passing this border could be interpreted as a rite of passage (van Gennep 1960): an initiation rite recognised by the adult world, a rite children go through together with others of the same age. After leaving preschool class behind, they experience a liminoid position (Turner 1982) on the threshold to school. As they

start school, they might feel vulnerable because of contact with older school students and the new environment. But they can feel a little more secure because of a shared collective vulnerability (Garpelin 2003). As newcomers, they are not alone, and they can experience the strength of togetherness and resilience. They are in the same position as the others in their school class, regardless of their different abilities and experiences.

Our ongoing research with our colleagues from New Zealand should reveal more about the transitions between the preschool, the preschool class and the school for Swedish children. With an interpretive approach (Denzin 1997; Garpelin 1997; Mehan 1992), a relational perspective (Garpelin 1997) and the theory of rites of passage, together with our colleagues from New Zealand, we will reveal more about what the life for children in preschool, the preschool class and school means in general and what the transitions between the three institutions mean, in particular. We might also be able to contribute to knowledge about how we can lessen school failure for those not ready to meet the demands and expectations of school.

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